 Atwood’s unreliable narrator: Narrative as construct

Resource 19

1. Read the opening of Chapter 23.

‘This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It’s reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed…

When I get out of here, if I’m ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, yet at another remove. It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue, half-colours, too many.’

* 1. Analyse Atwood’s pallilogy (repetition of the word ‘reconstruction’ throughout this passage). What is the effect?
  2. How does the anaphora of ‘too many’ and the syntax of this sentence capture Offred’s inability to tell her story accurately?
  3. What might Offred mean by ‘even in the form of one voice to another’?
  4. Analyse Atwood’s noun choices. Why ‘parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances’, ‘gestures’, ‘shapes’, ‘flavours’, ‘air’, ‘half-colours’?
  5. What is Offred telling us about her reliability as a narrator?

1. What do we discover about the narrative as Offred muses, ‘I can’t remember exactly, because I had no way of writing it down’?
2. Read Chapter 40. Offred has sex with Nick for the first time to increase her chances of pregnancy, at the request of Serena Joy. Offred emphasises her unreliability by providing us with different versions of the event.

‘His mouth is on me, his hands, I can’t wait and he’s moving, already, love, it’s been so long, I’m alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending. I knew it might only be once.

I made that up. It didn’t happen that way. Here is what happened.

… “No romance,” he says. “Okay?”

… And so it goes. And so.

I knew it might only be once. Goodbye, I thought, even at the time goodbye.

… It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate.’

1. What do these different versions of the event reveal about Offred’s desires?
   1. What does this passage reveal further about Offred as a narrator and re-constructor of story?
   2. What impact does the ambiguity have on the reader?
   3. ‘So it goes’ is a famous line from Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Slaughterhouse Five. Research the meaning of the phrase as used by Vonnegut. What might be the impact of the allusion here?
2. Read the first six paragraphs of Chapter 41 (excerpts selected here).

‘I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilised. I wish it showed me in a better light… I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realisations important to one’s life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow.

… I’m sorry there is so much pain in this story. I’m sorry it’s in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing that I can do to change it.

… Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn’t once enough for me at the time? But I keep going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it… By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.

So I will go on. So I will myself to go on. I am coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well, but I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out. After all you’ve been through, you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth.’

1. What does the anaphora and verb choice of ‘wish’ in the opening paragraph reveal about Offred and her perspective on her story?
   1. Offred apologises for her story being ‘in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire’. Is the novel unstructured? How does Atwood’s narrative structure mirror Offred’s point of view? Provide textual evidence in support of your view.
   2. Offred has previously told us her story is a ‘reconstruction’. Here, she tells us it’s ‘truth’ and that ‘it hurts to tell it over, over again’. Why, then, does she tell it? Does this change your perspective of her reliability as a narrator? Can we believe what Offred tells us here? Find quotations, from elsewhere in the novel, which indicate the importance of communication.
   3. Offred addresses her reader directly in second person here. Who is the ‘you’ that Offred is addressing? Give evidence for your opinion.
   4. Offred describes her story as ‘sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story’. How does this figurative description match Atwood’s thematic concerns? How would you describe this imagery? How can it reflect her context?
   5. Atwood alludes to philosopher Descartes’ famous meditation ‘cogito ergo sum’, or ‘I think, therefore I am’, suggesting that thinking about one’s existence proves that existence in the pun ‘I tell, therefore you are’. What does this suggest about the power of narrative? Why does Offred need to believe this?
2. By careful selection of quotations, trace the gradual development of Offred’s relationship with the reader, starting with the distant, detached tone of the early chapters, ‘I try not to think too much. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last,’ moving through various stages to the second person direct address, ‘By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there. I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.’ Find more examples of how Offred builds her relationship with the reader.
3. The ‘Historical Notes’ and Pieixoto’s address. Atwood’s final section is presented as the transcript from a conference on the history of Gilead, some 200 years into the future. As with Offred’s narrative, it is presented in first person.
4. Why do you think Atwood chose to present this information in speech form rather than an academic third person voice?
   1. We discover that ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’, Offred’s story, was not a document, but ‘approximately thirty tape casettes’ and the arrangement of the structure of the narrative from the tapes ‘are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate’. What impact does this discovery have on the reader?
   2. Consider the various layers of Offred’s narrative – a woman’s story constructed verbally and recorded, from past events, pieced together by two men in the distant future and transcribed into written text. What do you think is Atwood’s purpose in creating this distance from Offred’s story?
   3. In failing to determine the identity of Offred from her story, Pieixoto instead researched the Commander to discover more. What comment is Atwood making about gender and power here?
   4. How does Atwood comment on her contextual concerns in this section? Give evidence.
   5. How does the allusion to Eurydice reflect Atwood’s core ideas?
   6. ‘Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day.’ How do Pieixoto’s closing remarks capture Atwood’s message about the nature of story?
   7. Is ‘Are there any questions?’ a fitting end to the narrative? Why/why not?
5. Offred uses other characters’ voices in her story, reconstructing their dialogue. Find examples of the following:
6. Aunt Lydia’s teachings at the Red Centre are reproduced in some detail, for example in chapters 13 and 20. She frequently talk in clichés, attacking sexual and other freedoms;
   1. This is counterpointed by Moira’s earthy comments and demotic, often obscene, language;
   2. When Offred recalls her mother’s feminist views, these too are reproduced in a different speech style;
   3. When we reach the section Historical Notes, Atwood creates another, very different voice for Professor Pieixoto, whose rather cynical, detached style is in sharp contrast to Offred’s sensitive, thoughtful and emotionally engaged tone.
7. How does the immediacy of Offred’s first person, present tense narration conflict with the layered detachment from her story that we discover at the end? Why does Atwood position us to feel close to her through her story, then distance us from her at the end?